



# *FBA Policy Brief*

## Ukrainian Veterans' Political Reintegration

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**IN THE COMING YEARS**, Ukraine's veteran population will grow sharply, making their involvement in political life crucial for the country's democratic strength and stability. Veterans bring valuable experience, enjoy strong public trust, and have a deep sense of civic duty. However, many veterans are left out of decision-making, face fragmented support from institutions, and carry unresolved grievances. This FBA policy brief explores the opportunities of veterans' political engagement, highlighting their strengths, vulnerabilities, and the structural barriers they face. It also outlines how Ukraine can build institutional trust, avoid polarisation, strengthen democracy, and make better use of veterans' skills and experience

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### Policy recommendations

1. **Strengthen institutional trust and create pathways for veterans' engagement:** Local and regional advisory councils could be reinforced to build trust in public institutions and provide clear pathways for veterans to participate in political processes, through oversight, dialogue, and transparent governance.
2. **Include veterans in policy discussions:** Structured consultation mechanisms, such as veteran advisory panels, could be established to guarantee veteran's voices are heard in policy debates, particularly in areas like economic and fiscal reforms.
3. **Expand leadership and civic training programmes:** More leadership and civic training opportunities could help veterans develop skills in civic engagement, advocacy, and political participation. Special efforts could be made to include marginalised groups and to deliver training in accessible and inclusive formats.

## **Introduction**

In the coming years, Ukraine's veteran population is expected to surge from 1.2 to 5-8 million (including family members), making their reintegration a national priority. Beyond economic, social, and psychological dimensions, ensuring their political inclusion is essential for stability and governance.<sup>1</sup> While veterans share the experience of military service, they are a diverse group—some were conscripted from different backgrounds, while others are career soldiers or first-time fighters. These differences shape their expectations and reintegration pathways, requiring inclusive policies that reflect their varied needs.

Veteran status is inherently political as those who fought for the country's defence expect a stake in its future.<sup>2</sup> Ukraine has a unique opportunity to strengthen veterans' representation in political decision-making, channelling their experiences into policy and governance. Addressing gaps in inclusion can mitigate disenfranchisement and mistrust, foster social cohesion, and reduce external vulnerabilities.<sup>3</sup>

In the Ukrainian context, political reintegration is the process by which veterans transition into formal politics, governance, advocacy, and decision-making. Beyond electoral participation—whether through existing parties or new formations—it includes engagement in civil society and policymaking. True reintegration requires more than representation; it demands trust in institutions, inclusive governance, and mechanisms to address structural grievances.<sup>4</sup>

This policy brief first examines the strengths veterans bring to Ukraine's democratic development and their potential to drive institutional reform. As a growing political constituency, they hold significant public trust and influence over governance, security, and national identity. However, ineffective political reintegration—characterised by exclusion, political manipulation, or marginalisation—risks fuelling disenfranchisement, social fragmentation, and radicalisation. To prevent these challenges and harness veterans' contributions, Ukraine requires a structured political reintegration strategy that fosters inclusive governance, policy engagement, and institutional trust. The following sections outline how

veterans shape the political landscape, the risks of ineffective reintegration and policy recommendations to ensure their participation strengthens Ukraine's democratic resilience.

## **Veterans' Political Impact and Readiness**

Veterans in Ukrainian politics are not a new phenomenon. Some primarily pre-2022 veterans have transitioned into political roles, though their involvement has been fragmented and often overshadowed by established political forces. They are poised to become more distinct and influential political stakeholders as their numbers grow.<sup>5</sup>

A strengths-based approach to reintegration recognises that veterans are not just beneficiaries of support but active contributors to governance and reform.<sup>6</sup> Their sense of civic duty, fairness, and justice can help shape Ukraine's democratic development. Their familiarity with bureaucratic systems—often defined by corruption and inefficiency—gives them insight into institutional weaknesses, particularly in the security sector. With the proper support, veterans can draw on their leadership experience, pragmatism, and resilience to contribute to meaningful institutional reform.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, veterans enjoy strong public trust (78 per cent), positioning them as credible advocates for governance reforms, including in the realm of veterans' policy.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond direct participation, veterans influence Ukraine's political landscape as a voting bloc. While ideologically diverse, many lean toward nationalist and patriotic positions, supporting sovereignty, territorial integrity, and a pro-Western orientation. This often translates into hostility toward Russia and advocacy for strong defence policies.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, veterans are vocal critics of corruption and ineffective governance, favouring economic self-sufficiency.<sup>10</sup> Social views vary, with younger, more educated veterans tending towards progressive reforms while others maintain conservative perspectives.<sup>11</sup>

Additionally, even in light of the growing presence of women in the ranks of the armed forces and in leadership positions in both the military and civil society, significant gender disparities in political engagement persist. Systemic barriers and gender

stereotypes continue to constrain their representation in formal political structures, and many women veterans report self-censorship on critical issues like domestic violence or sexual harassment within veteran communities, limiting their advocacy potential.<sup>12</sup> This gender gap mirrors broader trends in Ukrainian politics, where women's political representation lags significantly behind men's—ranking 91st globally on political empowerment according to the World Economic Forum's 2024 Gender Gap Index, despite the country's overall 63rd position in gender equality measures.<sup>13</sup>

Veterans' high political engagement makes them crucial in shaping governance, security, and national identity.<sup>14</sup> Political inclusion will become even more critical in light of potential cuts to veterans' benefits due to anticipated budget deficits over the medium to long term. Integrating veterans into these difficult conversations—allowing them to explain and advocate through political dialogue—can help foster a pragmatic sense of acceptance, if not outright approval, for such measures.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Risks of Ineffective Political Reintegration***

Ukraine's rapidly growing veteran population faces economic strain, psychological challenges, and risks of marginalisation. Veterans in eastern Ukraine have already voiced such grievances, citing abandonment and a lack of agency in shaping political processes.<sup>16</sup> These sentiments could escalate if future peace agreements involving territorial concessions deepen disillusionment, distrust, and feelings of betrayal towards the government. Mitigating these risks demands a proactive and inclusive approach to political reintegration—one that prioritises veteran representation, economic opportunities, and psychological support systems.

Unaddressed grievances may fuel political polarisation and exacerbate divisions between veterans and broader society. As of March 2025, the conditions for broad support are clear: while around 75% of Ukrainians support a temporary ceasefire or peace initiative, 80% believe fighting should continue rather than accepting a deal that is perceived as unfavourable or equivalent to surrender.<sup>17</sup>

Russia's long-term strategy aims to destabilise Ukraine, threaten its sovereignty, and obstruct Western integration.<sup>18</sup> External pressures compound Ukraine's internal weaknesses, increasing the risk of societal polarisation. If unable to transition fully into civilian life, veterans could become particularly susceptible to such destabilising influences. Russia's geopolitical strategy continues to prioritise having influence over Ukraine through various destabilisation mechanisms. This approach threatens not only Ukraine's domestic stability but also its broader aspirations for Western integration and democratic consolidation.

In Ukraine, far-right groups exploit veterans' grievances through paramilitary networks and informal employment, undermining democratic institutions.<sup>19</sup> While recruitment of veterans by far-right groups and other non-state actors remains limited, reintegration failures heighten risks. Weapons proliferation and synthetic drugs increase criminal exploitation risks, necessitating stronger oversight and reintegration policies.

Ukraine's veterans hold significant potential to shape its democratic and political landscape, yet structural barriers, institutional weaknesses, and lingering mistrust in state systems impede their effective reintegration. While 41 per cent of veterans report feeling prepared to engage in political decision-making and 59 per cent believe they can influence their communities, this sense of readiness often fails to translate into sustained political engagement. Many continue to report estrangement from civilian decision-making structures, shaped by negative past experiences with institutions and persistent doubts about their responsiveness.<sup>20</sup>

Institutional fragmentation and weak decentralisation marginalise veterans, especially in rural areas, where resource gaps limit political engagement. Moreover, competing reintegration priorities, including securing stable livelihoods and addressing health-related needs, often precede civic and political activities.<sup>21</sup> Veteran-led NGOs bridge veterans and the state, yet resource and coordination challenges limit their impact. Strengthening these



networks is essential for building long-term pathways to veteran inclusion in civic and political life.<sup>22</sup>

Veterans' symbolic importance in Ukraine's national narrative has also made them vulnerable to exploitation by mainstream political parties and interest groups who leverage their visibility for campaigns and pressure tactics without addressing their needs.<sup>23</sup> Such practices erode veterans' trust in institutions and pose risks of polarisation, particularly if grievances remain unaddressed.

### **Conclusion**

The reintegration of Ukraine's rapidly growing veteran population represents a national challenge and an opportunity to bolster democratic resilience and stability. Veterans, as trusted leaders with proven service experience, possess the potential to advocate for reform, address governance gaps and strengthen accountability. However, unlocking this potential requires targeted policies that overcome structural barriers, address institutional fragmentation and rebuild trust in state systems.

Effective political reintegration is not only a tool for democratic inclusion but also a strategic imperative to mitigate destabilisation risks and counter external and internal threats. Marginalisation can fuel disillusionment, polarisation, and exploitation by extremist groups and criminal networks, whereas integrating veterans into decision-making roles reduces these vulnerabilities and reinforces public trust in democratic institutions.

Decentralisation reforms, veteran-led NGOs, and leadership programs can create pathways for veteran political engagement and reintegration. Policies must also account for veterans' diverse identities, ensuring equitable access to resources and removing barriers for marginalised groups through training, mentorship, and advocacy networks. A resilient governance structure prioritising veterans' reintegration is key to national security and sovereignty.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the analysis in this brief, the following actionable recommendations are proposed to guide Ukraine's strategy for veterans' political reintegration. These recommendations prioritise institutional reforms, capacity-building, and counter-extremism measures while ensuring sustainability and accountability through monitoring frameworks.

#### **1. Strengthen institutional trust and pathways to political reintegration**

To enhance institutional trust, existing local and regional advisory councils under the Ministry of Veterans Affairs and the The Verkhovna Rada's Committee on Social Policy and Protection of Veterans' Rights could serve as structured platforms for policy input, grievance resolution, and dialogue between veterans and state institutions. Strengthening independent oversight bodies, including the military ombudsman's office, with adequate resources will improve transparency and accountability. Clear state communication strategies can help manage expectations and reinforce public confidence.

Ensuring that veterans actively participate in governance rather than remain politically marginalised requires structured representation, institutional oversight, and trust-building mechanisms. The Ministry of Veterans Affairs, in coordination with the Ministry of National Unity and the Verkhovna Rada's Committees on National Security and Social Policy and Protection of Veterans' Rights, could lead efforts to support veterans' integration into local governance and democratic processes by establishing a multi-sector steering committee with veteran-led NGOs, civil society organisations, and international development partners. This committee could coordinate policy design, decentralisation efforts, and governance reforms to create viable pathways for veterans' political engagement. By embedding veterans in legitimate governance structures and reinforcing institutional trust, this approach mitigates risks of extremist recruitment and criminal exploitation, preventing political disenfranchisement from becoming a security threat while fostering social cohesion.

## ***2. Encourage veteran inclusion in policy debates***

Given the anticipated budgetary pressures on veterans' benefits, fostering inclusive dialogue and engagement in economic and policy discussions will be essential for maintaining trust and social cohesion. It is recommended that the Ministry of Economy and the Verkhovna Rada's Budget Committee establish veteran advisory panels to facilitate structured consultation mechanisms. These platforms enable veterans to advocate for their priorities, contribute to fiscal policy discussions, and enhance transparency around necessary reforms.

Strengthening the role of veteran advocacy groups in these discussions could further ensure that veterans' perspectives are reflected in decision-making processes. Expanding engagement through veteran-led working groups, advisory panels, and public forums would foster collaborative solutions to budgetary challenges while reinforcing veterans' roles as active political participants rather than passive recipients of state support. International financial institutions can provide advisory support to ensure sustainable economic reintegration policies.

## ***3. Build capacity through leadership and civic training programs***

Expanding leadership and civic training opportunities could be advanced through collaboration among the Ministry of Veterans Affairs, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Social Policy, working in partnership with universities, think tanks, and civil society organisations. Training programs could strengthen civic literacy, leadership, and advocacy skills.

To ensure inclusive participation, particular attention must be given to politically marginalised groups, including women, veterans with disabilities and those in rural areas, by integrating online platforms, mobile outreach and flexible formats to accommodate caregivers and single parents. Veteran-led organisations should play a key role in program delivery, fostering peer-to-peer engagement and ensuring relevance to veteran experiences and needs. Expanding the institutional capacity of veteran-led NGOs enhances accessibility, awareness, and representation, reinforcing their role as active

participants in governance, policymaking, and community leadership. The engagement of international donors and private sector partners in supporting mentorship and civic education initiatives may further enhance programme reach and sustainability.

## Endnotes

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## Authors biography

**Dr. Erin K. McFee** is the Founder and President of the Corioli Institute, a global organization focused on supporting the reintegration of formerly armed actors and improving security, resilience, and social cohesion in conflict-affected communities. She is also a Senior Non-Residential Fellow at the Atlantic Council. As a political anthropologist, she has worked across Latin America, Africa, the Mena region, and Eurasia since 2010, studying the reintegration of military veterans, ex-guerrillas, insurgents, and gang members as well as advising international bodies on veteran reintegration. The Corioli Institute has conducted significant research in Ukraine, gathering life histories and leading veteran workshops. Dr. McFee holds a PhD from the University of Chicago and is an awardee of the UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship and Fulbright-Hays.

**Jonathan Röders** is the Director of Projects & Programs at the Corioli Institute. His work centers on livelihood security, trust-building, reconciliation, and the societal reintegration of individuals formerly associated with armed groups. He has worked in a range of conflict-affected settings, including with FARC ex-combatants in Colombia, former cartel members and incarcerated individuals in Mexico, and military veterans and their families in Ukraine. He also contributes to original research, oversees the Corioli Institute's brand identity and social media presence, and helps develop conceptual frameworks guiding its mission. Jonathan holds a BA in Political Science from the Freie Universität Berlin and an MSc in International Social and Public Policy from the London School of Economics (LSE).

**The Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA)** is the Swedish government agency for peace, security and development. Since 2014, the FBA has been actively engaged in supporting Ukraine's reform and development efforts. Following Russia's full-scale invasion, supporting veterans' reintegration and transition to civilian lives has become a critical component of Ukraine's recovery and long-term resilience. FBA contributes to these efforts by working with stakeholders at national and local levels to develop inclusive reintegration strategies, enhance coordination among state institutions, civil society and international partners, and promote gender-responsive approaches that advance social cohesion, equality and a sustainable recovery.

## THEMATIC POLICY BRIEF SERIES: UKRAINIAN VETERANS' REINTEGRATION

This policy brief series is the outcome of an initiative by the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) to explore key dimensions of veterans' reintegration in Ukraine. The aim of the series is to contribute to policy development by providing evidence- and experience-based insights into the challenges veterans face in their transitions to civilian life and to offer recommendations that seek to enhance Ukraine's reintegration frameworks. The brief series sets out to present a succinct overview of central dimensions of reintegration processes, viewed through a Ukraine-specific lens, within four key areas: Political reintegration, economic reintegration, gender dimensions of reintegration, and community-based reintegration (CBR).

FBA would like to thank the authors who have shared their knowledge and perspectives to help shape this work. The views and recommendations presented in this series are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of Sweden, FBA or any other partner organizations.